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BUCKLEY: HER ACT IS TOGETHER

Continued from First Page

which Buckley describes as "full of feeling, full of caring, full of love, an important little show," may be academic, because ABC has now placed it on a back burner—not exactly canceling it, but announcing that it would only be seen in occasional holiday specials next season. Which, as Buckley knows, is the kiss of death.

The show, based vaguely—very vaguely—on the career of newspaper columnist Tom Braden and his huge family, began in the spring of 1977 with Diana Hyland playing the wife of Dick Van Patten and the mother of the eight Bradford children. After the first eight episodes were aired, Hyland died of cancer. Rather than simply replacing her, the producing Lorimar organization chose to offer Van Patten as a grieving widower trying to raise the eight kids himself.

The next year, Buckley joined the cast as Van Patten's second wife and the stepmother to the eight young Bradfords. There's solidity to the part of Abby—she was a young widow, 29, whose husband had been killed in Vietnam, and after a period of mourning she met "this nice, gentle, funny man."

"She was not a stereotype," Buckley says. "I've never played a stereotype. What I played was how that woman lived up to what she had never been before—a mother—and her preconceived notions of what a mother should be. And I sure as hell fought the scripts to make sure she wasn't a stereotype—*the* mother of the commercials. I've played enough of those!

"In doing 22 to 26 shows a year, you don't always get what you want, but more often than not we hit a standard I'm very proud of. I don't like it when people call us a fantasy family. I think they call us things like fantasy and stereotypical because they're uncomfortable with the reality we achieve . . ."

What Betty Buckley will do next after she completes the run of "Getting My Act Together" Aug. 23 depends to some extent on what happens with "Eight Is Enough." She co-stars with Richard Crenna in a CBS movie, "The Carney Case," due in the fall, and she's been invited to conduct a symposium on the musical theater at Harvard.

She's been doing musicals since the age of 11 when she joined the production of "Pajama Game" at the big Casa Manana summer theater in Fort Worth, Tex., singing and dancing "Steam Heat." She's been a member of Equity since she was 15, sang and danced in Casa Manana shows until her graduation from Texas Christian University. She majored in journalism—"My father didn't want me to be in the theater; he thought journalism more respectable."

But after a brief hitch on the Fort Worth Press as a reporter, she wound up on Broadway as Thomas Jefferson's wife Martha in the hit musical "1776" (Ken Howard was Jefferson). The next year, she starred in the London company of "Promises, Promises," later was one of the stars of "Pippin" in its long Broadway run, sang "Walking in Space" in the movie "Hair" and played the sympathetic gym teacher in the hit horror film "Carrie."

Though she's been a rodeo rider and a trainer of horses and dogs, she lives in an apartment here and has one in New York. She says she's seen too many performers who "get into the big bucks of a series and get the house and the pool and the fancy cars and become slaves to their life style." She's a vegetarian, a student of the Jain Eastern philosophy that reveres all living things, a disciple of Gurudev Chitrabhanu.

Gretchen Cryer, who wrote the book of "Getting My Act Together" with composer Nancy Ford, was Betty Buckley's standby in "1776," and Buckley has been a fan of everything Cryer & Ford have written. When she read this play, she begged for the chance to play Heather but was told "You're too young," and anyway it was written out of Gretchen's guts and she wanted to play it herself.

Last year, Buckley replaced Cryer in New York briefly, and then last February replaced her here—"By that time, I was doing 'Eight Is Enough' and I guess they thought I was old enough." Actually, Buckley and the fictional Abby are about the same age.

Though the play is rich in feminist rhetoric, Buckley gives Heather an unsureness, a hesitancy that is very touching. She has immense appeal for young people—Vine Street is crowded nightly with long lines of students waiting to buy unsold seats at student rates.

Curiously, one major number mocks the sexist ceremony of Miss America, and Buckley as a student competed and won the Miss Fort Worth title—but lost out as Miss Texas.

"I was the first loser ever to be invited to be on the Miss America telecast, representing all the losers in America," said Buckley. "I went on the Miss America tour to Asia—we were supposed to go to Vietnam but some entertainers had been killed and we went only to Japan and Korea, visiting hospitals, talking to guys wounded in Vietnam—guys with legs blown off, with their insides shot away, one guy with his face blown off, only his eyes looking at us . . .

"They talk about delayed stress. On 'Eight Is Enough' last year, a script came in out of nowhere—it wasn't one of our usual scripts—in which a marine who had served with Abby's husband in Nam sent her some pictures of him. It brought it all back to her.

"To prepare myself for the part, I went back over the diary I had kept when we visited the hospitals in Korea and Japan. I could see it all again, those boys, the eyes looking at me. I had this delayed stress reaction over something as tragic and useless and senseless as war. I sat weeping, weeping, weeping . . . Which is what Abby did in the script. And they call it fantasy."

CAMPESINO: HOUSE OF 'ZOOT SUIT'

Continued from First Page

gram note. Later, in his office, he elaborated:

"We're looking at a whole new ballgame. We've only performed sporadically in San Juan over the past 10 years. We're counting on drawing on audiences from our core area plus the entire Central Coast. We have to learn how to do it.

"We want to do a subscription theater. We hope to come in with some sustained runs. And we're definitely casting from the outside, building on our experience as an ensemble, then casting from within and from outside the group. We'll rebuild the company on an annual basis, by holding auditions to join for 12-month periods. You know," he confides, "you can work one another to death."

For those who fear that this is the end of El Teatro as we have known it, the answer is probably yes. But why mourn? It's a question of evolution. Grow or die. Valdez understands this. El Teatro's core group—about 15 people—does, too. The Campesino will continue to stand for the same principles. It will simply expound them differently.

If "Rose of the Rancho" is any indication of El Teatro of the future, it is welcome. The production has spirit, talent, savvy and a nicely balanced cast of core group members and outsiders—some gringo, some not.

This heroic romance of Good Guys vs. Bad Guys, the honorable government agent (Gregory Michaels) who defends the rights of Spanish landowners against poorly written laws and unprincipled land grabbers, is directed by Condon with a deliciousness that wisely, yet barely, avoids out and out camp.

Our government agent (Michaels could use more spine in his performance) is, of course, also in love with the daughter of the Spanish family whose property he so valiantly, if fumblingly, defends. She's the Rose of the title, played with gumption and spirit by Cynthia Ann Valdez, who can also sing and dance. Spice is added by her mother's determination to marry her off against her wishes to another Spanish landowner, the handsome Don Luis (Mark del Castillo Morante).

The finish is a simultaneous clash of competing males and a cliffhanger. Our hero's deputy, Lt. Larkin (Arye Gross) arrives with the militia and documents that save the day, moments before the Spanish estate capitulates to the evil Kincaid (W. Dennis Hunt, a ringer for Lee Marvin in "Cat Ballou") and Rigsby (Don J. Boughton) and their rabble-rousers. Rose must choose between her gallant suitors—a situation deftly handled by Condon, as is the whole production.

Designer Pyle has created a hacienda set complete with operating fountain and a wall that obliges by folding to serve as the ramparts for the crucial second-act apotheosis. It's a breathtaking feat, in pure Pyle tradition.

Some of the voices are difficult to hear, especially Julio Medina's. His heavy accent, compounded by the problem of echoing walls, makes him hard to follow. But it would be mean-spirited to complain about minor anomalies in this presentation, which exhibits the best of the Campesino as we have known it with intimations of what might be.

Roberta Delgado's excellent choreography heightens the impressive professionalism of the production (something that has not always been a Teatro hallmark). Designer Kim Simons has adorned everyone attractively according to station, rank or level of derelictation. Live and lively music is provided by Frank Gonzales (composer and musical director), Luis Moreno, Yolanda V. Parra and Steve Valdez.

Yet the real event remains the creation of the theater itself. Luis Valdez does not for a moment underestimate the significance of this step, nor its power to shape and alter the future.

"We plan to tour again," he said, "but not until next year. We have to concentrate on understanding what we are doing here first. And then we want to go for extended runs in San Francisco, Fresno, Los Angeles and allow audiences to come to us.

"We're also planning symposia and workshops right here in San Juan. We want to invite guest directors and workshop leaders. We couldn't do it before. We can now. And we want to train people. I'm looking for an associate director to help me run this place. It doesn't have to be a Chicano necessarily, but it will have to be someone who sees eye to eye with me.

"I plan to continue doing film, though it's something of an open question. I want to write. There's a crucial connection between my stage and film work. (The) 'Zoot Suit' (film) was a crash course in how to survive. I survived and learned a lot. Now I want to use the stage to work out story and characters before putting them on film. It's cheaper."

As for the immediate future, it's mostly budgeting, audience development, working out an arrangement with Equity (the actors' union) and concentrating on a subscription season of four plays. These are all new concerns. So is talking to the Kiwanis in nearby Hollister, a sign of growing community acceptance.

"Mundo," a play by Valdez and the core group, in still another reshaping, will follow "Rose of the Rancho." "La Pastorela" will be done at the Mark Taper in Los Angeles at Christmas. "La Virgen del Tepeyac" will play the mission that season in San Juan. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Sam Shepard has expressed a desire to work with El Teatro. It will be interesting to see what comes of combining his sense of American mythology with El Teatro's. And, of course, there's more building to do and the fixing of technical problems.

"The solution to our sound and lighting problems is to raise the roof," Valdez said. "We've been given an affordable estimate and we'll probably do it after the first of the year."

As if he hadn't already.

CULT VICTIM OF SPLIT PERSONALITY

By the end of the Blue Oyster Cult's concert Sunday night at the Los Angeles Sports Arena, the self-styled "intelligent" heavy metal band found itself a victim of its own split personality.

On the one hand, the New York City-based quintet features unusual lyrics from such renegade literary figures as Michael Moorcock and R. Meltzer, presenting them in a sophisticated framework of truly inspired riffs and sweeping melodies. On the other, the group persists in pandering to the lowest common denominator of the audience's expectations, relying on virtually the same set of standard theatrics (fog machines, fireworks and more) offered up by every other band on the arena rock circuit. The evening's sole exception was a 30-foot smoke-breathing replica of a dinosaur, complete with blinking red searchlight eyes, wheeled out during the Cult's rendition of (what else?) "Godzilla."

The main reason the Cult lapses into such cheap gimmickry is that the group lacks the charisma to capitalize on its foreboding image. Erick Bloom's ludicrous "I-sold-my-soul-to-the-devil-for-rock-stardom" rap was as menacing as a kiddie horror movie host's. The band also realizes that arena rock audiences thrive on ritualized musical workouts, the use of which detracts from the Cult's considerable musical abilities, particularly lead guitarist Buck Dharma's quicksilver flights.

Despite it all, the Cult remains a potent live attraction whose arena set ranged from pulverizing riff-rockers like "Hot Rails to Hell" and "Cities on Flame With Rock and Roll" to eerie midtempo mindscapes such as "Veteran of the Psychic Wars," "Don't Fear the Reaper" and "Joan Crawford," the latter a monument of black humor describing public reaction to the late actress appearing freshly risen from the grave on the streets of Brooklyn.

In comparison, the second-billed Pat Travers Band waded through an hour's set without once striking an original note. The boyish Travers is no singer and his vaunted guitar playing, reminiscent of a lobotomized Hendrix, has all the tension of cooked spaghetti. His boogie-fied version of Little Walter's "Boom Boom (Out Go the Lights)" and the crowd-pleasing "Snortin' Whisky and Drinkin' Cocaine" tell you all you need to know about Traver's imagination (or lack thereof). The Johnny Van Zant Band, reviewed here recently, opened.

—DON WALLER

EVENING OF JAZZ AT PRESS CLUB

The Buddy Collette-Fred Katz Quintet will headline an evening of jazz on Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Los Angeles Press Club, 600 N. Vermont Ave. Also performing will be the Mundell Lowe Quartet.

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